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UK Libraries Plus: a vital lifeline

Report on the survey of the UK
Libraries Plus scheme July 2000
funded by SCONUL for the work of the
Task Force on Distance Learning.

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SUMMARY

The typical UK Libraries Plus customer is a 38-year-old postgraduate student, studying an MSc in social sciences or an MBA, who values the service for book loans and for easy access from their home. They regard the scheme as vital for their studies. They learned about the scheme through library induction or a tutor. They would like to be able to borrow more books than current quotas allow.

INTRODUCTION

UK Libraries Plus (UKLP) is a reciprocal borrowing and access scheme covering 91 higher education institution (HEI) libraries in England, Scotland and Wales. The scheme allows part time students, distance learners and full time students on placement limited borrowing rights at up to three libraries in addition to their home HEI. Staff and other full-time students can apply for reference only access and are given a card valid at any of the 91 libraries. Records are only kept of borrowing users in order to simplify administration of the scheme.

The scheme started in the summer of 1999 following an initiative by Philip Payne, Head of Learning Support Services at Leeds Metropolitan University. The basic operating principles of the scheme were inherited from the London Plus scheme which had run very successfully in London and the south east since the late 1980s. For the full details of the scheme, readers should see the scheme web site(1) and the article by Philip Payne and the author in the Library Association Record(2).

In the same year, SCONUL set up a task force to look at services to distance learning students. The task force, led by Elizabeth Heaps, Librarian at York University, set itself an objective, amongst others, of evaluating the UK Libraries Plus scheme as a major initiative of benefit to distance learning students. The author had been co-opted on to the task force as the representative of the Higher education Colleges Learning Resources Group (HCLRG). In order to evaluate the scheme, a survey was proposed and a questionnaire developed in consultation with both the Task Force and the UKLP Steering Group, chaired by Philip Payne. The survey was funded by SCONUL to support the work of the task force.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was designed to be sent to registered users of the scheme, i.e. those 40% of students taking membership cards from their home library and then actually redeeming them at a host library. We sought to find out basic information on course, home HEI and age as we felt the scheme was most likely to benefit mature students. We wanted to find out how they knew about the scheme and the value they placed on the benefits they gained from membership. Finally we wanted to leave space for general comments on the scheme and asked for details (optionally) to allow follow up questions. A prize of £50 was offered to encourage a good response. The whole questionnaire was kept to two sides of A4 only in order to minimise printing costs and keep the questionnaire short, again encouraging completion. A cut off date of 30 July 2000 was set to be eligible for the prize draw. The task force optimistically hoped for 200 responses.

THE SURVEY

The questionnaire was sent in June 2000 to all registered borrowing users of the scheme, at the time reckoned to number some 1300 across the then 82 member libraries who had returned statistics in March 2000. (The bulk of forms were sent to the 58 libraries who had joined by December 2000.) With the help of school placement students, the questionnaires were prepared with stamped return envelopes and packaged for distribution at the UKLP representatives conference held at London Guildhall University on 14 June 2000. Packages ranged in size from single questionnaires to over 150. The author is very grateful to the staff at the member HEIs for addressing the questionnaires and posting them out to the registered users. Some HEIs chose to add a few extra forms to the survey to reflect increased take up of the

scheme since the March census. For the purposes of the survey results, it is assumed a total of 1300 questionnaires were sent out.

THE RESULTS

Within three days of the conference, returns came flooding in, on some days up to 40 replies in one post. 503 were returned in total, a response rate of 39%. We can be confident that the results are thus statistically significant.

The results were analysed by creating a very large table in Excel 97, again with the help of two school placement students.

The respondents

The first section asked a few basic questions about the customer:

- Home HEI
- Course
- Mode of study (part time, distance learning, full time placement or other)
- Age

HOME HEI

Response were received from students studying at 63 member libraries out of the 82 included in the survey. The biggest responses were from students based at London Guildhall University (36) and South Bank University (27). Given the maturity of the former London Plus scheme, it is not surprising that the best responses came from the students from HEIs which had been in that scheme.

Course

Analysis of the qualifications shown and course title show that 55% of customers are postgraduates and 38% undergraduates.

Qualifications to be obtained ranged from BA to PhD, the most common being an MSc (28%) or MA (19%).

The titles of courses reflect the fascinating variety of courses offered in HEIs today, the author's personal favourite being a Diploma in Counter Fraud.

A rudimentary grouping of the courses into Arts and Humanities, Business and Finance, Education, Law, Medicine, Science and Social Sciences shows the largest group to be the Social Sciences (23%), closely followed by Business (21%) (reflecting the ubiquitous MBA).

Mode

Part time students are 65%, with distance learners on 23%.

Age

Oldest respondent declaring an age is 75, youngest 19. Just over a third of respondents are in the 30-39 age group (34%) with the 40s containing 28%. The mode (most frequently occurring) age is 40, the average age being 38. So we can confirm that users are mature, as expected.

THE SCHEME

The remainder of the scheme asked about knowledge of the scheme and use:

- How did respondents learn about the scheme?
- Which other libraries had they used?
- What aspects of the scheme were considered helpful?
- Overall how useful was the scheme to their studies
- Comments

Learning about the scheme

Personal contact is key: 33% cited library induction, 29% a tutor and 12% another student, accounting for 74% of responses. In contrast only 2% had found us via the web site and 6% through a leaflet.

Other libraries

Most respondents only use one other library, with only 24 (4.7)% exercising their right to use two and a mere 2 (0.4%) the maximum three. Most popular destinations were South Bank (52) and Kingston (33) again reflecting the maturity of the scheme in the London area.

Useful aspects

We asked respondent to score the following aspects of the scheme to see what provided the greatest benefit to them. Taking the responses giving the score 1 (Vital), the features ranked as follows:

Easier to travel to than my home institution's library	75%	(374)
Borrowing books	66%	(333)
Access to additional information sources	42%	(211)
Place to study	16%	(82)

Given that the scheme is primarily about borrowing books from a more convenient library, it is not surprising to find a high value placed on these aspects of the scheme

Overall importance

Respondents were asked to give an overall score for the importance of the scheme to their studies. 55% gave the scheme a score of 1, i.e. vital to their studies, 83% giving the scheme a score of 1 (vital) or 2 (important). It is pleasing that for those that use the scheme, it is a key part of their studies.

Comments

The three main concerns were:

- 28% wanting to be able to borrow more books than their current quota
- 9% wanting access to computers (not part of the scheme)
- 7% wanting access to the Internet (not part of the scheme)

The latter two issues of giving access to computer resources to students from another HEI have been picked up in a paper by John Heap for UCISA(3). The SCONUL Distance Learning Task Force report also recommends that the HE IT community find ways around authentication problems to provide this service.

Other more local problems were picked up by email or phone if possible. One outcome of this was the redesign of the scheme web site to show the local representative and their email address to provide a local contact.

There were also some very complimentary comments about the value of the scheme to our customers. These give a useful flavour of the problems part time and distance learning students have to overcome:

BSc Coventry University:

'While I was studying for my BSc Counselling I was living at home in Radlett, Herts and going up to Coventry once a week in term time for lectures/tutorials. This involved travelling 4 hours each time! I can honestly say I could not have completed my degree without being able to use Univ. of Herts library. It was invaluable.'

PhD student living in York, studying at Kingston University:

'This scheme is essential to students, such as myself, whose supervisors are at universities at the other end of the country.'

MA History and Culture of Sport, living in Street Somerset, using UWE and registered at De Montfort:

'.. it is a vital lifeline, and only one hour from home rather than 4.'

BA Early Childhood, living in Pulborough West Sussex, using Brighton, registered at North London:

'I am very grateful to the scheme as I do not live anywhere near my home library and the county libraries only have a limited amount of books in specific areas. Gaining access to a university library has been a great help to my studies, thanks.'

MSc Facilities Management, using York, registered at Leeds Met:

'In the second year, UK Libraries Plus came as a real boost and should benefit other distance learning students...'

Counter Fraud course, using Oxford Brookes, registered at Portsmouth:

'Excellent. I would not have been able to accept the course if it were not for the scheme.'

MSc Facilities Management, registered at Leeds Met, using Nottingham Trent

'Very useful scheme for accessing books and journals without having to travel 160 miles round trip!'

MBA, registered at Lincolnshire and Humberside, using Keele

'Good scheme easy to use. People at home library & at Keele very helpful & co-operative - made it a pleasure & felt a member of both institutions'

MSc Human Resources, registered at South Bank, using North London

'Very good idea - saves me time travelling'

MA Management Studies registered at Canterbury Christchurch UC, using East Anglia

'Full time employment means access to a library is not, necessarily on my door step. This has been compounded by a recent move to Norwich. Without this scheme it is extremely unlikely that I would be in a

position to complete (or continue) my studies.
Thumbs up from me!"

E-mail

To take part in the prize draw, we asked for contact details, including e-mail. We used this as a crude measure of the access to computers by UKLP customers. 61% quoted an e-mail address, so the IT access issue described above is likely to be important for a third of our customers.

CONCLUSIONS

UK Libraries Plus is a scheme valued highly by its mature user group who would like to be able to make more use of the resources we offer them.

APPENDIX 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

See next page

REFERENCES

- 1 <http://www.lisa.sbu.ac.uk/uklibrariesplus/>
- 2 Payne, Philip and Edwards, Adam, 'Share and share alike', Library Association record, 102 (9) September 2000, 514 - 515.
- 3 Heap, John, 'Support for off-campus learners', UCISA, July 2000. <http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/docs/reports/heap.doc>